Cultural geographies in practice

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Showing the way out of the fly bottle: searching for Wittgenstein in Norway

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Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) famously wrote in his second book titled *Philosophical Investigations* that one of his goals in philosophy was 'to shew the fly the way out of the flybottle.'[1] The comment is a direct attack on the myopic ways philosophers can trap themselves in their own gnarly problems. Wittgenstein hoped to remedy the basic confusion at the heart of most philosophical investigations, by clarifying the navigable landscape of human knowledge, in other words, by showing what we can and cannot do within philosophy.

Wittgenstein was primarily concerned with language: the way it relates to the world and the ways we use it to communicate with each other. Although his thinking on the subject displays a radical change between early and late in his career he always assumed that language was central to human experience. With its discursive and text-centric nature, philosophy in particular depends on a person's ability to express meaningful statements, that is, to build convincing arguments within clearly framed contexts. However,

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language can also be put to much more speculative ends. Philosophers ask all sorts of impossible questions, things that cannot be answered definitively or with any kind of sense. There is a strange oddness to most philosophers' language use; driven by skepticism and the infamous 'Why?', philosophers are reluctant to take things at face value, and tend to over-worry the connection between words, intent, and meaning. Where in many situations the skewed perspective unearths implicit contradictions and can help us get to the root of our disagreements with one another, often it introduces more epistemological drama than is necessary or even relevant. Wittgenstein believed that if we understood the nature of our confusion – that it was the oddness of our methods rather than anything inherent in the things themselves that led to puzzlement – then many of our problems would go away.

For Wittgenstein metaphysics was the prime suspect, that branch of philosophy that sought to articulate and discern the underlying principles of all being. Any attempt to stand outside the whole, therefore outside language, is doomed to failure. Unfortunately, our language allows us to conceive of such a transcendental stance. We can ask what is *behind* our language to assure us of its reference. We can create circular arguments that appear logical but nonetheless lead nowhere. And we can posit an objectivity to our situation that belies the essential subjectivity of all knowing. Hence the fly trapped in a fly bottle of its own making.

I remembered Wittgenstein's plea about flies and fly bottles as I tromped along the banks of Lake Eidsvatnet in Skjolden, Norway. I had come to Norway searching for the remains of a small hut Wittgenstein built here and was deep in the thick brash edging the lake, trying to follow a faint trail that supposedly led up to the site. As I neared the water, swarms of black flies billowed up from the ground and engulfed me. Immediately Wittgenstein's words danced in my head and I knew I was on the right track. My motives for coming to Norway were still unclear to me; I had a vague hope that I would somehow understand Wittgenstein better, but I did not know what to expect or what I would find. I was looking for signs and the flies provided that.

Wittgenstein first visited Skjolden on a short holiday in 1913. He traveled with a friend from Cambridge, England, where he lectured in philosophy. Finding the small town to his liking, he returned alone a few months later for an extended stay. It was at this point that he decided to commission the hut. In stark contrast to the social circles of Cambridge and Vienna he appreciated the simplicity and seriousness of the place. He interacted with a small group of local residents and occasional colleagues, but overall he lived a relatively hermetic existence in Norway. He valued the seclusion so he could attend to his work and his days were spent writing and going for long walks. Wittgenstein lived here off and on for various periods of time until 1950. While in Norway he wrote notes that formed the basis of his most seminal books: the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Notes on Logic, Philosophical Investigations, Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*, and *Culture and Value*.

Skjolden sits on the end of the Lustrafjord in the heart of the Sogn fjord district, roughly 250 km northeast of Bergen. It is surrounded on all sides by mountains that rise quickly up from the water. The hut site is perched on a high narrow ledge, overlooking Lake Eidsvatnet, which runs into the fjord. There is no detailed map of the hut's location and it is no longer visible from the lake or the main road. Only a rudimentary sketch exists, drawn by Wittgenstein in 1936 for G.E. Moore, a fellow philosopher who was visiting from England.

The sketch pictures the town, the lake, and the major features of the surrounding topography (mountains, rivers, fjord). It provides a general orientation to Wittgenstein's hut, but the level of abstraction means that reaching the hut still requires basic route-finding skills. When I realized the paucity of Wittgenstein's drawing – the fact that it can only get you in the general area – it both did and did not make sense to me. Here was a man so meticulous in his analytical pursuits, yet his directions to the hut were sketchy and vague. But here also was a man who trusted our ordinary abilities to communicate, to speak within the same language games as he called them, so obviously he felt the map was good enough to accomplish its goal. The fact that there was more to the picture than pictured or more precisely more to the world than represented by his map or his words fits perfectly with Wittgenstein's love-hate relationship with reference. Nevertheless, while on site I decided a more definitive document was needed, something that could help others find Wittgenstein with more confidence.

Despite the lack of explicit directions, there is an informal trail that leads to the site, forged by others who have come looking for the building. The signed trailhead lies just to the left of Vassbakken Kro Camping, a typical Norwegian campground outside of town. The trail initially follows a dirt road, lined to the

right with brilliant red-twigged dogwood and to the left with a grassy plot of open land. It continues over a stream feeding Lake Eidsvatnet to a 'Y' at the bottom of the mountains. Going up at this point takes you to Mount Hjerseggi, but the way to the hut follows left. Hugging the mountainside then veering slightly away, the trail moves through a series of muddy fields that take you closer and closer to the lake. Before reaching the water the trail peters out into a sinewy tangle of criss-crossing tractor paths. Farmers still use this front land for planting. In fact, the day I arrived, a farmer had just applied a fresh layer of cow manure. I had to struggle through the muck to reach the edge of the woods, where the trail picks up again, though much fainter and narrower.

Two hand-made wood placards mark the entry point into the woods, one stating 'Wittgenstein,' the other stating 'W.' The trail passes between these two signs and then leads just to the left of a dilapidated wood shed. Once you enter the woods the trail is tagged with large red W and TW letters. They are spray painted onto rocks, trees, and other immovable objects along the way. In Norway, trails that are officially maintained by the Norwegian Mountain Touring Association (DNT) are marked with bright red Ts. On an ad hoc basis someone has borrowed this familiar marking system and marked the Wittgenstein trail in a similar manner.

After the freeform tracking through the mud and manure the signs are reassuring. A person can't really get lost here: the lake and the mountains keep you oriented. But uncharacteristically for a nature hike I welcomed the evidence that others had been here before me. It suggested a community of Wittgenstein devotees, each of us on our own but heading in a similar direction. As the trail picks its way through the woods, it bounds the lake and finally heads up into the mountainside. A series of short, steep switchbacks later and the final turn abruptly ends at the site of the hut. Wittgenstein used to row across the lake and dock just below, avoiding the walk through the muddy fields. Or when the lake was frozen, he would walk across it instead. However, he climbed the same switchbacks that any visitor must take to reach his home.

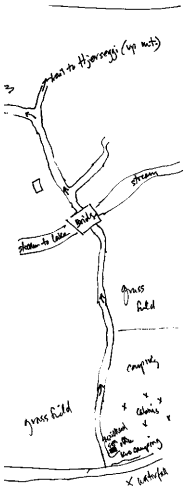
I was of two minds when I got to the top of the trail. The site itself is nothing special. There are no markings or commemorative plaques. The wood structure is gone, leaving only the stone foundation and a root cellar, which the natural environment is gradually overtaking. Even the scenery is generically nice, not spectacular. If I didn't know who Wittgenstein was, the place would not stand out, just another abandoned relic left to fade away in the pretty Norwegian countryside. But given my knowledge of Wittgenstein, it had all the charge of any pilgrimage site. A unique individual had sought solace here, and I was now in close proximity to where the crux of his thinking occurred. Yet it was an intangible bit of myth and

history that convinced me of the significance of this place, not anything I could see for myself on site.

This dual response, by which events experienced in body simultaneously took on additional interpretive meaning, occurred throughout the search for the hut. It happened when I moved gingerly through the mud and cow manure: how appropriate that one should have to wade through shit prior to reaching any higher state of philosophical understanding. It happened when I first spotted the crude signposts along the trail: chagrined at the overly obvious signage but welcoming the friendly gesture. And it happened during the onslaught of flies by the water. Part of me relished the attack: The perfect storm of insects was the world showing me viscerally what Wittgenstein meant. The flies were being released from their bottles en masse, flooding the air with a great energy that could now be put to better use. But alongside this interpretation I was frantic that I might inhale the swarm and choke or suffocate. They buzzed my face and torso like an apocalyptic cloud. I might respect the irony of awakening the flies from their slumber in Wittgensteinian terms, but in body they were sudden, thick, and distressing.

Even the mix of joy and disappointment at trail's end resonated on multiple levels. The anticlimactic feeling – the recognition that there is no there, there after all – worked with Wittgenstein's notion of a failed metaphysics. Philosophy simply couldn't deliver on that promise. Nonetheless, although an epiphany was not to be had so easily, the hiking was good.

This double consciousness made my search for Wittgenstein's hut much more complex than a simple walk in the woods. Phenomena were always experienced on two levels: that of



an embodied subject making its way through an empirical world of overwhelming sensations (confrontation with the physical landscape) and that of an analytical subject narrating the meaning of events in extra-sensorial ways (confrontation with Wittgenstein's texts). I don't mean to imply that one of these responses is more authentic or purer than the other: I believe the sense data are every bit as mediated and processed as the extra-sensory data. Nor was metaphor ever strong enough to subsume what was happening to me physically. They both remained tense and active, and greatly enhanced my experience of this place.

What does a rich life of the mind look like? Can it be found in the wilds of Norway or located on a map? Wittgenstein's choice to live such a Spartan existence shows that it is not external trappings that enable intense thinking and creativity. Rather it is a cultivated ability to make the world to be more than it appears. To Wittgenstein's credit, this is as much the real benefit of philosophy – or the language deployed therein – as it is its primary flaw.

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Map drawings and photographs courtesy Jan Estep, 2007.

Biographical note

Jan Estep is an artist, writer, and trained philosopher. Her art writing has appeared in *Frieze, Modern Painters, Bomb, Afterall*, and *New art examiner*. Her artist books *Ad Infinitum and Desert Maps*, and *Hot Air Sincerely* are available at Printed Matter, Inc., along with a fully illustrated, folded sheet map titled *Searching for Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lake Eidsvatnet, Skjolden, Sogn, Norway*. For more information visit www.janestep.com. She can be contacted at: Department of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA; email: jestep@umn.edu

Note

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd Edition), trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1953/1968), Proposition #309, p. 103.